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Efficient teaching
Martin Bastkowski

Lexical sophistication
Ben Naismith

Don't give up!
Monica Ruda-Peachey

Delicious dishes
Melanie Oh Hye Min

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Don't give up!

Monica Ruda-Peachey doesn't hold back when it comes to taking on phrasal verbs.



Wouldn't you like to have £1 for every student who has rolled their eyes when hearing the words *phrasal verbs*? I believe that even the most determined and diligent

student finds phrasal verbs difficult to understand, difficult to remember and difficult to use. Their struggle is real, and so is that of the English teachers tasked with teaching phrasal verbs. So much so, in fact, that some avoid teaching them at all costs. Of course, ignoring them isn't the solution – phrasal verbs are too widely used in spoken everyday language to simply forget about them.

So why are phrasal verbs so difficult to learn and, indeed, to teach? What can be done to help students and teachers in such a challenging task?

Four questions

First of all, we should remember that phrasal verbs are a particular feature of Germanic languages: in many languages, the concept of phrasal verbs is non-existent. Furthermore, speakers of Latin-based languages are familiar

with (and consequently prefer to use) the more formal synonyms of the English phrasal verb. Take *postpone* and *put off*, for example. In English *postpone*, in Italian *postporre*, in Spanish *posponer*: the similarities are noticeable and analysis of the word is quite straightforward. The English word is composed of the prefix 'post' (= after) and part of the verb 'ponere' (= to place), both Latin. Analysis of *put off*, on the other hand, isn't as effortless. 'Put' is a colloquial synonym of 'to place': so far so good. But what about 'off'? In the eyes of a learner, 'off' might mean 'cancel' or 'delete', not 'move to a later date'.

Secondly, we should consider how many phrasal verbs there are in the English language – there are said to be over 3,000! Learners can be easily discouraged once they become aware of such a long list – never-ending, they might say. This large number might also confuse teachers and have an impact on their way of approaching phrasal verbs in the classroom. The most frequent questions that go through a teacher's mind in this case might be:

- 1 How many phrasal verbs should I present in one lesson?
- 2 How should I introduce them?
- 3 What about the multiple meanings of each phrasal verb?
- 4 Should I group them according to their verb or to their preposition/particle?

Four answers

1 How many phrasal verbs should I present in one lesson?

English language teaching isn't an exact science, so there isn't a magic number to determine exactly how many phrasal verbs should be taught in one lesson. The recommended number is around five to ten, but this obviously depends on the type of students – for example, their proficiency level and their level of commitment. I personally believe that it's better to truly master the use of two or three phrasal verbs than to have a vague confused idea of ten of them!

2 How should I introduce them?

This depends on the teacher's creativity and on the students' expectations. Perhaps some students might feel comfortable reading a long list of

phrasal verbs and trying to memorise each meaning, but I don't think this is the most effective way. The teacher might want to explore a more visual approach, using pictures, storyboards, reading texts, or any other way that might engage the students more and help them make sense of the target language, avoiding mechanical memorisation.

3 What about the multiple meanings of each phrasal verb?

Again, it depends on the type of students and on the type of phrasal verb. If the additional meaning (not the one I intend to focus on) is obscure or uncommon, I feel justified in giving it a miss. On the other hand, if it's a high frequency meaning, I would include it – or I would, at least, check the students' understanding and/or their previous knowledge. This sounds rather convoluted, so let's break it down, taking the phrasal verb *look up* as an example:

- I would assume that my students already know the 'physical meaning' of the verb, as in tilting their head backwards and looking at the ceiling.
- If I wanted to check that pre-existing knowledge, I would draw some stars on the board and write four options: *up, down, left, right*.
- I would then ask them to choose one of the four directions if they want to see the stars. They would (hopefully) choose *up*.
- I would ask them what verb they would put in this sentence: *I _____ up to see the stars.*

This would take only a couple of minutes but it has several advantages:

- 1 The students are completely engaged.
- 2 It helps me check their understanding of the meaning.
- 3 It provides a starting point for teaching the target language.

At this point, I would proceed to introduce the meaning that I actually want to teach – *look up* as in 'search in a dictionary' – using the following procedure:

- I would write on the board a word that is probably unfamiliar to the students, such as *cantankerous* – it is highly unlikely they will know this.
- I would then ask them what they would do to find the meaning of the word.
- After listening to their ideas (dictionary, *Google*, etc), I would write: *You need to _____ it _____ in your dictionary*, and ask them to complete the sentence.
- If they struggle, I would point at the stars that I drew earlier, as a clue.

As with the previous steps, this shouldn't take long, and it can be an effective way of keeping the students engaged and involved in the lesson, resulting in better retention of the target language.

So, I would say the bottom line is that you can teach more than one meaning for each phrasal verb if it's helpful to do so. If not, I would leave any additional meaning out. Sometimes, a student has already heard of that 'other' meaning and asks for clarification. Don't feel that you have to discuss it there and then: you can put it off (phrasal verbs are everywhere!) until the next lesson.

4 Should I group them according to their verb or to their preposition/particle?

In my opinion, neither option is effective. In my experience as an ESL learner and teacher, the best way to teach phrasal verbs is *in context*, just as you would teach vocabulary. Simply put, work on the phrasal verbs related to a single topic. Use the topic your class is currently working on to inspire you. Here are some examples:

Topic	Phrasal verbs
Relationships	Ask out, fall for, break up, settle down
Phone conversations	Pick up, hang on, hang up, get through, put through
Crime	Break into, break out of, lock up, tip off



To sum up, my advice when it comes to teaching phrasal verbs is as follows:

- Choose a topic.
- Select the 'right' number of phrasal verbs to present, keeping your students' level in mind. Be sure to choose phrasal verbs that they are likely to encounter often.
- Build a lesson structure that seamlessly includes the phrasal verbs of your choice.
- Be creative with your material to keep engagement levels high – visuals often do the trick.

Expect a positive reaction from your students – no more rolling of their eyes! ■



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